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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 DHAKA 001326

SIPDIS

PASS TO PEACE CORPS

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SUBJECT: BANGLADESH PARLIAMENT CAMPAIGN: IN KHALEDA ZIA
STRONGHOLD, SIGNS OF DISENCHANTMENT

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Classified By: Ambassador James F. Moriarty. Reasons: 1.4 (b) and (d)

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Bogra District in northern Bangladesh is Ex-Prime Minister Khaleda Zia's most formidable stronghold, but her Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) faces rumblings of discontent. Although BNP candidates won all seven Bogra constituencies in the 2001 Parliamentary elections, Zia refused to renominate four who chaffed at her and her son Tarique Rahman's absolute power within the party. Among those nominated in their stead are unsavory characters, including a reputed murderer and a reputed trafficker in persons. Although BNP leaders believe the party is so strong in Bogra those new candidates will win, local media and independent political observers are not so sure. They speculated candidates from the rival Awami League could win one and possibly two seats. The loss of even a single seat in the district would be a stinging rebuke to the BNP and its chairperson.

BOGRA: THE BNP HEARTLAND

¶2. (U) On the western shore of the wide Jamuna River in northwestern Bangladesh sits Bogra District, the heartland of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party. The district's favorite son was Ziaur Rahman, founder of the BNP and former President of Bangladesh. After his assassination in 1981, Bogra's political loyalty transferred to his wife, Khaleda Zia, who took over as chairperson of the party. She ran for Parliament in two Bogra constituencies during the last election in 2001, obliterating both her Awami League opponents; in one constituency she received roughly four times the votes of her opponent. (Note: Candidates can run in up to three constituencies per election; if they win more than one the other seats are filled in a by-election. End note.) She is running in the same two constituencies in the December 29 Parliamentary elections and is expected to win by landslides again. During a campaign swing through the district on December 17, she repeatedly mentioned her special attachment to Bogra in speeches at several large political rallies.

¶3. (C) The connection between her eldest son, Tarique Rahman, and Bogra is particularly strong. As BNP senior joint

secretary general, Tarique made weekly trips to Bogra that some viewed as preparatory work for launching his own bid for a Parliamentary seat. (Note: Tarique is not running in the December elections because of a political deal under which he left jail, where he had been held on corruption allegations, for London for medical treatment. End note.) As son of Khaleda Zia and a senior party leader, Tarique far eclipsed the Bogra members of Parliament. The many major development projects in Bogra during the 2001-2006 BNP administration -- including initiating natural gas delivery, widening key roads and building a medical college and hospital -- are attributed to Tarique's influence. The walls of BNP headquarters in Bogra's district capital are plastered with posters of Tarique, holding a dove about to fly away, next to the slogan: "Bangladesh will be waiting for you."

REFORMISTS ARE OUT...

¶4. (C) Those strong personal ties to the district no doubt emboldened Zia and her loyalists to act against four members of the 2001 Parliament from Bogra who had crossed them. All four won by comfortable margins in the last election and were, in the words of prominent local civil society leader Mohammad Harun-or-Rashid, "really good members of Parliament. They were against corruption." Among the former MPs the party did not renominate were Rezaul Bari Dina, a soft-spoken former BNP Parliament whip who has been a frequent Embassy contact; Ziaul Haq Molla, a medical doctor elected to Parliament four times; and G.M. Siraj, a prominent businessman also elected four times. They were considered BNP reformists, a loose-knit group of lawmakers who favored a less autocratic party. This was the main reason they were

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denied nominations, according to BNP Bogra District President Mohammad Rezaul Karim Badsha. "They betrayed the party chairwoman," he told PolOff.

¶5. (C) During a December 15-18 trip to Bogra, PolOff met Siraj at Food Village, his hyper-busy travelers' rest stop on the main road to Dhaka. He proudly noted he did not go to see Khaleda Zia to curry favor after her release from jail on bail in September. (Note: Zia was in jail on multiple accusations of graft. End note.) "I want democracy to prevail in the party," he explained. Siraj also criticized Tarique for acting like royalty and surrounding himself with lickspittles. "When Tarique came into politics we could not adjust," Siraj said of the reformists. "We were very uncomfortable."

...SCOUNDRELS ARE IN

¶6. (C) Although Tarique was in London, Siraj and others believed he was involved in the replacement of the reformist ex-MPs with candidates of sullied reputation. "Tarique loves notorious guys," Siraj said. The most notorious of the replacement nominees is Mohammad Shokrana, whose businesses include the premier Bogra hotel, grain import and foreign currency exchange. He is best known, however, for reputedly terrorizing Bogra as an Awami League youth wing leader during the 1970s, when Bangladesh first became independent. The respected newspaper The Daily Star in a December 13 article quoted unnamed sources as saying Shokrana was involved in more than 30 murders; the journalist who authored the report told PolOff that Shokrana had been convicted on numerous charges, most dating from the 1970s, including murder. "People are scared of him due to his previous background," said civil society leader Mohammad Harun-or-Rashid (protect). (Note: In a brief meeting at his office in the Hotel Naz Garden, Shokrana told PolOff his arrests had been under a martial-law government. He claimed the President of the

subsequent democratically-elected government pardoned him. Shokrana also acknowledged being jailed by the Caretaker Government for what The Daily Star journalist Hasibur Rahman Bilu described as hoarding relief goods. He called the recent charges an "injustice." End note.) Badsha, the local BNP president, professed to be ignorant of Shokrana's earlier misdeeds; anyway, he said, whatever Shokrana did as an Awami League youth leader decades ago was not the BNP's responsibility.

¶7. (C) Two other BNP candidates in Bogra, AKM Hafizur Rahman and Jane Alam Khoka, have checkered pasts as well. Bari Dina, the former BNP Parliamentary whip who lost the nomination to Hafizur, contemptuously called him "Heathrow man" for reputedly being caught at the London airport in 1996 while trying to smuggle up to 16 Bangladeshis who were on his flight. Local journalists and civil society leaders were familiar with the allegations. Rabiul Karim Helal, secretary of the Fair Election Monitoring Alliance (FEMA) in Bogra, said he believed Hafizur "definitely" attempted to traffic Bangladeshis through Heathrow and claimed the candidate had engaged in similar activities earlier. Meanwhile, longtime labor leader Khoka was arrested during the 2002 "Operation Clean Heart" anti-crime campaign on allegations of clashing with the combined forces but, according to Bilu, was not convicted. A January 24, 2008, article in The Daily Star said the Anti-Corruption Commission filed a case against Khoka and his wife on charges of "amassing huge wealth through illegal means." In an interview, Khoka told PolOff the investigation ultimately sputtered. He said he was set free after nearly 13 months in jail.

BOGRA PEOPLE MAY NOT RUBBER-STAMP PARTY CANDIDATES

¶8. (C) PolOff spoke to several political observers in Bogra who argued both Shokrana and Khoka faced tough contests, in large part because of their sullied reputations. It may not be coincidence that during her one-day barnstorm trip to Bogra on December 17, Khaleda Zia held two major rallies in the two candidates' constituencies to bolster their

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campaigns. Shokrana is facing veteran Awami League candidate Mohammad Abdul Mannan who is making a fourth and final attempt to enter Parliament. Mannan is well known to local voters and received nearly 75,000 votes in 2001 compared to 120,000 for the BNP candidate. Both Shokrana and Mannan receive support from groups of thugs who already have faced off in at least one minor clash, according to FEMA official Karim Helal. Their Bogra-1 constituency includes tens of thousands of people who live in remote islands in the Jamuna River, making the race especially prone to intimidation and ballot fraud, he added.

¶9. (C) Khoka is running against Awami League candidate Habibur Rahman, a former police superintendent, in the Bogra-5 constituency last represented by Siraj. An independent candidate who came in second place to Siraj in 2001 is supporting the Awami League candidate, local observers said. So too, they say, is Siraj, who received more than 185,000 votes in 2001. While Siraj told PolOff he would not betray the BNP, he also acknowledged he refused a party request to campaign for Khoka. He also praised the Awami League candidate as a "very good" man who was different from Bangladesh's typically corrupt police.

COMMENT: DID THE BNP GO TO FAR?

¶10. (C) Bogra is supposed to be such a solid BNP stronghold that candidates themselves don't matter much because people automatically vote the party line. That proposition may be strongly tested December 29 in some of the district's seven

constituencies. If nothing else, an Awami League victory in at least one Bogra constituency would be an embarrassing personal rebuke to Khaleda Zia and her son, Tarique Rahman. It also would be a forceful message that at least some voters who have long supported Ziaur Rahman and his family were more interested in a change at the helm than in perpetuating his family's political dynasty.

MORIARTY